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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000133

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: CARDINAL TAURAN ON LEBANON AND POPE'S EVOLVING VIEWS OF ISLAM

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, DCM, EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Cardinal Tauran, the new head of Vatican interreligious dialogue and one of the Holy See's Lebanon experts, told Ambassador September 12 that Pope Benedict has changed his mind in some ways about Islam, and now sees a new basis for relations based on shared fundamental values. Tauran said the Pope is looking for suitable Muslim interlocutors. On Lebanon, Tauran said Patriarch Sfeir is effective, and the only resident authority for Lebanese Christians. He added that Sfeir is "better now, but seems lost". Tauran agreed that Lebanese Christians must unite, said Aoun has no chance, and expressed great concern for the Christian population in the country. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador and DCM called on Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran September 12 to welcome Tauran to his new position as head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Tauran, who was the Holy See's longtime foreign minister under Pope John Paul II, was until recently the Vatican's chief librarian. Tauran modestly brushed off several questions with reference to his having just arrived in his new position, but nevertheless made several interesting observations:

-- he drew attention to a little-noticed remark made by Pope Benedict XVI while on vacation last month, pointing to the Ten Commandments as a basis for the Church's future relations with Muslims. While no reply has yet been received from prominent Muslims, Tauran found this remark to be significant (perhaps as a hint of warming toward Islam). The reference was to statements made by the Pope to a group of priests, in which he suggested that discussing theology and the mysteries of the faith would be difficult with Muslims, consensus could instead be found on the basis of shared fundamental values as expressed in the Ten Commandments -- summarized by love of one's fellow man and love of God -- and subject to interpretation in all walks of life. The Pope continued that "we are at least on a common path toward the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God that is finally the God with a human face, the God present in Jesus Christ". This final point (i.e. the divinity of Jesus) would have to be addressed in small, intimate groups given its sensitivity; but even large gatherings could share a sense of a common road toward God.

-- DCM mentioned a public letter written to the Pope by 38 prominent Muslim scholars in the wake of last year's controversial papal remarks in Regensburg, Germany; the letter respectfully disagreed with some of the Pope's interpretations and invited an academic exchange. Tauran, somewhat surprisingly, said he was not familiar with it ("I'm too new") and did not know of any response.

-- Tauran said the Pope is looking for suitable Muslim intellectuals to talk with, concentrating on universities. He reiterated that there is no possibility of theological dialogue.

Asked about the on-again, off-again visit of al-Azhar scholar Shaikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, Tauran noted that Tantawi had been criticized at home for accepting an invitation from the Pope. He added that perhaps Cardinal Poupart (Tauran's predecessor at Interreligious Dialogue) had spoken too quickly in saying publicly that the Pope looked forward to meeting Tantawi. In any event, no such visit looks likely now, though Tauran himself will visit al-Azhar in February.

-- Tauran observed wryly that his own appointment demonstrated the Pope's sagacity, since he (Tauran) is well known in the Arab world.

-- Tauran said that Pope Benedict's December 2006 visit to Turkey had a profound effect on him and had in fact changed his mind on Islam to some extent, adding that "whenever you pray, walls fall down".

-- On Lebanon, Tauran first disclaimed current expertise, but demonstrated keen interest. He does not believe Aoun can succeed in becoming president. Agreeing that Lebanese Christians must unite, Tauran (who had met the Patriarch a few days earlier) said that Cardinal Sfeir is indeed effective, and in fact is the only authority for the community. Tauran noted that Sfeir "is better now, but seems lost"; he emphasized that Sfeir cannot be forced into anything. The best solution for Lebanon would be for them to be let alone. Tauran expressed particular concern over the "hemorrhage" of Christians, whom he estimated to be down to 35 percent of the Lebanese population.

¶3. (C) Comment. Tauran's June appointment to Interreligious Dialogue drew attention and approval from Vatican-watchers and in the Muslim world. In February 2006 Pope Benedict removed Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald from the job and sent him off to Cairo as papal nuncio, in a move that was widely seen as both a quasi-demotion for Fitzgerald and a diminution of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The new head of the dicastery was Cardinal Paul Poupart, who was well-respected and serious but

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who also headed a separate dicastery (i.e., department), the Pontifical Council for Culture. Poupart's retirement this summer (routine, as he was already two years past the normal retirement age of 75) provided the Pope with the opportunity to revisit the issue. By naming the relatively young (64) and dynamic Tauran to head Interreligious Dialogue without any other responsibilities, the Pope signaled a return to prominence of the dicastery and its mission. The dicastery deals with all non-Christian faiths except Judaism, but the dialogue with Islam is by far the most important at present. The fact that Tauran has considerable experience in the Middle East (especially Lebanon and Syria) was also certain to be favorably recognized in the Muslim world.

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